Overview

The media in Burkina Faso enjoyed a number of improvements to the legal and political environments in 2015, after mass protests in 2014 brought an end to former president Blaise Compaoré’s 27 years in power. A National Transition Council (CNT) then exercised administrative authority until November 2015, when Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was elected president following a campaigning period that received robust media coverage. Nevertheless, restrictions on media freedom remain, including onerous financial penalties for libel. A number of media outlets and journalists were attacked during a failed coup that took place in September.

Key Developments

- Legislation approved in September 2015 eliminated prison sentences for libel and other press offenses, but also increased fines for those found guilty of violations.
- An investigation into the 1998 death of journalist Norbert Zongo was reopened in April 2015, and in December, three former soldiers in Compaoré’s presidential guard were charged with his killing.
- Many radio and television stations, and journalists, were attacked during the September coup attempt perpetrated by backers of Compaoré.
• The presidential election campaign was characterized by critical and diversified media coverage, and state broadcasters demonstrated greater independence from the government than under Compaoré.

Legal Environment: 16 / 30 (↑2)

Article 8 of the 1991 constitution and the 1993 Information Code guarantee freedoms of expression, information, and the press, though these rights are not always respected in practice. In September 2015, the CNT adopted new legislation abolishing prison sentences for libel and other press offenses, though the law also dramatically increased potential fines. Following pushback from press groups and a critical review of the law by the Constitutional Council, in December the range of fines was reduced to between 500,000 and 3 million CFA francs ($800 and $5,000). However, media advocates continue to argue that these amounts are inappropriate and could force sanctioned outlets out of business. It is unclear how the change in the law affected convictions that took place earlier in 2015. In July, the managing editor of the investigative newspaper Le Reporter, Boureima Ouédraogo, was sentenced to three months in prison and fined 300,000 CFA francs following a libel conviction, though he remained free pending an appeal after the new legislation was adopted.

The Burkinabé legal system, and the judiciary in particular, had long been perceived as lacking independence during the Compaoré era. However, under the transitional government, a number of unresolved, high-profile cases involving the media attracted renewed official attention, including the 1998 death of Zongo, a prominent journalist. The investigation into his death was reopened in April 2015, and in December, three former soldiers in Compaoré’s presidential guard were charged with his killing. No verdict was reached by year’s end.

Article 49 of the Information Code grants every journalist free access to sources of information, with exceptions pertaining to the internal or external security of the state, military secrets, strategic economic interests, ongoing investigations or legal proceedings, and anything deemed to undermine the dignity and privacy of Burkinabés. In practice, officials use these exceptions frequently, and this makes obtaining government information difficult.

The official media regulatory agency, the High Council for Communication (CSC), is nominally independent. However, of its nine members, six are state appointees and only three are drawn from professional media groups, giving the government outsized influence over media regulation. For years, the CSC has been criticized for inconsistent and mismanaged licensing procedures. The body has the power to summon journalists to hearings about their work and even suspend or ban outlets that violate ethical standards or the law. The CSC actively monitors the media sector, including online outlets, to ensure compliance with its dictates. In May 2015, it issued a three-month ban on live radio and television broadcasts of a political nature, purportedly to protect “social cohesion” in the run-up to presidential election. The ban was withdrawn later that month after a number of television and radio programs ignored the order.
Several professional groups exist to support journalists’ rights and interests, including the Centre National de Presse Norbert Zongo (CNP-NZ), the Association des Journalistes du Burkina (AJB), and the Société des Editeurs de Presse (SEP).

**Political Environment: 12 / 30 (↑1)**

During the Compaoré era, the national public broadcaster, Radiodiffusion Télévision du Burkina (RTB), exhibited a progovernment slant and was heavily influenced by the executive branch. However, RTB has experienced much less political interference since the beginning of the transition, and journalists have acknowledged they that have a freer editorial line. A new director general, Marie Danielle Bougaïre-Zangreyanogho, was appointed to head RTB in January 2015 as part of an effort to reform the station’s internal governance and improve transparency. The presidential election campaign was characterized by critical and diversified media coverage.

There is no official censorship in Burkina Faso, and media outlets conduct investigative journalism that can be critical of the government. Self-censorship, which was common during the Compaoré era, has become less frequent since the start of the transition.

Cases of harassment and physical violence against journalists are generally rare; however, a spate of assaults, threats, and other forms of violence occurred in September 2015 in connection with a military coup perpetrated by Compaoré loyalists in the presidential guard, which temporarily displaced the transitional government. Coup backers attacked, pillaged, or burned the offices of numerous media outlets, including Radio Omega, Savane FM, Radio Laafi, and Mogtedo and Goudri radio stations. The offices of the television station BF1 in the capital, Ouagadougou, were also attacked, and RTB was temporarily taken over by the coup’s perpetrators. Journalists from a number of outlets, including news websites and the newspapers Sidwaya and Le Pays, were physically assaulted. Coup leaders were forced to restore the transitional government at the end of September following the eruption of popular protests and the regular army’s imminent recapture of the capital, which it had surrounded. Two journalists were arrested in December for alleged complicity in the coup. The government claims the charges have no connection to their work as journalists, and local press groups are monitoring their cases.

**Economic Environment: 13 / 30**

Burkina Faso enjoys a diverse media landscape, counting nearly 70 newspapers, over 130 radio stations, 21 television stations, and 14 news-providing websites. RTB was established as the national broadcaster in 1963, and operated the only television channel for many years, but a handful of private television stations now compete with it.

Although private print media is growing, the ownership of print outlets still lacks transparency. The Burkinabé print sector struggles with interrupted production, low literacy rates, and generally poor economic conditions that make broadcast media the preferred choice for news and entertainment. Radio is still the most popular medium and source of information. Community radio stations are prevalent throughout the country and play a
significant role in local development and community building. Programming in local languages such as Mooré, Mandinka, and Bambara that address issues of gender equality, reproductive health, and domestic violence has contributed to diversity of content. Foreign radio stations are able to broadcast freely. Insufficient infrastructure and cost has limited internet access, which stood at just 11 percent of the population in 2015.

Many outlets are not financially sustainable, and journalists are often poorly paid, if at all. This results in journalists often choosing to provide coverage for which they are offered financial compensation, leading to conflicts of interest.

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